

I

A Utopian Commune, 1636-1686

In the first decades of its existence Dedham was a remarkably stable agricultural community. It was also a utopian experiment, hardly less so than the famous Amana, Oneida, and Brook Farm experiments of the nineteenth century. The founders of this community set out to construct a unified social organism in which the whole would be more than the sum of the parts. To a considerable degree, they succeeded.

rchases, these grants made Dwight one of the richest in the years between 1649 and 1660. He passed both his comfortable estate and his prestige on to his son, Timothy, thereby initiating a family line marked by both distinctions.⁷

Eleazer Lusher was the one settler who could have made a fortune had he wished. Within the town his political influence was unmatched, while within the colony he was one of a handful of men who made the vital decisions. His position as deputy and as Assistant brought him into contact with enterprising men from all over New England. Yet Lusher never became overwhelmingly wealthy. His estate of some 500 pounds was less than the estates of several of his village neighbors and only grants of land from town and colony in recognition of his services brought his estate up to this moderate level. He died less wealthy than almost any of his fellow Assistants, never having become a land speculator or merchant as did so many who moved in the higher spheres of power. Whether because of his ignorance or, more likely, because of his restraint, at the end he bequeathed to the distant relatives who survived him only the possessions of a solid local farmer.⁸

These are the outlines of eight lives, the lives of eight Englishmen who came to Dedham early in the seventeenth century. They are varied lives and the possibilities they raise are fascinating. Yet they have limitations. Because the record is meager, their outlines lack many of the meanings which might have been garnered. Only an exceptional life left testimony enough for a full biography and the most exceptional of men often left no clue to their inner thoughts. Moreover, even

7. *Records*, III, 143, 160, index; IV and V, indexes. Also, Benjamin W. Dwight, *The Descendants of John Dwight* (New York, 1874).

8. *Records*, all volumes, indexes; Massachusetts Historical Society card catalog under "Lusher," especially photostat documents dated May 7, 1662, and October 19, 1664; Massachusetts Archives, card catalog index under "Lusher"; Probate Office, Suffolk County, lists wills of most Assistants; *Dedham Historical Register*, II (1891), 130ff.; Suffolk County Deeds.

the sparse details that survive concerning these plain men reveal how difficult it is to base generalizations on the peculiarities of individual lives. For every model Puritan there was a ne'er-do-well; for every pioneer, a butcher; for every patriarch, a man who died prematurely. The very variety which lends fascination also frustrates any attempt to characterize the whole society through individual histories. Ultimately the underlying patterns of society in Dedham can emerge only from a consideration of the dull samenesses which have ever dominated human existence. And what the common features of all lives portray is an isolated, small, stable, homogeneous agricultural community which resembled the rural society of seventeenth-century Europe as much as it resembled the "land of opportunity" dear to the hearts of generations of American students and scholars.⁹

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The overwhelming majority of the settlers came to Dedham to stay. They neither ranged restlessly west nor sought wealth in the developing metropolis of Boston. Most put up temporarily in a nearby town while they looked things over, then moved to Dedham and there initiated a sequence of generations which would intertwine their names with the history of the town for several centuries to come.¹⁰ Because of the stability of the

9. Much of the information that follows is based on collective "biographies" of all of the first fifty men to arrive in town and of slightly over half of the eighty-odd men of a "second generation," which matured between 1665 and 1685. The information is drawn from the *Records*, from the Suffolk County Probate Office Registry of Deeds, and Court Files, from the Massachusetts Archives and the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, from manuscript records in the Dedham Historical Society, and from printed sources. Common features have been the focus of the inquiry, and the dominant features are presented here.

10. Though a significant minority, perhaps a third, of the early settlers eventually lived in at least three different New England towns. It is probable that geographic mobility was greater in the first two decades after 1630 than in the entire century thereafter. A detailed

settlers and their posterity, the town became a self-contained social unit, almost hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. Less than one percent of the adult males in town in a given year would be newcomers, while less than one percent of the adult males would emigrate in a given year. Some of the rare immigrants settled permanently in the town, but others were drifters who did not stay more than a few years and whose departure merely served to raise a little the low level of emigration. Most of the remaining emigrants moved no farther than an adjoining town or "moved" only in the eyes of the law when the distant part of Dedham in which they had always lived was incorporated as a new town. A scattering of officials and servants came and went; young women from nearby towns married into local families while young ladies of Dedham married in turn into the families of those towns; and some young men left town before reaching the age at which they appeared in the records.¹¹ Otherwise, hardly anyone stirred in or out. By way of comparison, the only contemporary English villages whose level of mobility is known were consistently more mobile than this American village.¹²

analysis of mobility and demographic characteristics in Dedham may be found in K. Lockridge, "The Population of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736," *Economic History Review*, XIX (1966), 318-44. This article includes data from neighboring Watertown, which confirm the analysis of Dedham.

11. Because of flaws in the early records, the emigration of young men is difficult to trace. An educated guess, based on birth and tax records and genealogical works, would place the level of emigration of males below age twenty-four at between ten and fifteen percent—most probably close to the former. As will be seen, the reluctance of young men to seek opportunity elsewhere was a typical, persistent and highly important feature of Dedham's history; it was a feature found in other towns of New England.

12. See Peter Laslett and John Harrison, "Clayworth and Cogenhoe," *Historical Essays, 1660-1750, Presented to David Ogg* (London, 1963), edited by H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard. Dedham's decennial rate of continuity was between fifty-six and seventy-six percent, as against forty to fifty percent in Clayworth and Cogenhoe.

In fact, the society of the village was quite narrow and self-centered. The number of family names actually declined from sixty-three in 1648 to fifty-seven in 1688, and an increasing majority of the population belonged to a group of thirty-odd enduring clans who could trace their roots back beyond 1648. Collectively and individually the members of the commune had little to do with outside authorities. They obeyed the law of the colony, but not always. They paid their colony taxes, but the taxes paid for local purposes were usually twice as great. As the town sought to avoid involvement in the courts of the colony, so did each man. The average inhabitant was a plaintiff or defendant in civil proceedings no more than once in his life-time and involvements in criminal proceedings were virtually nonexistent. Nearly all land transactions were small exchanges between Dedham men. Two or three speculators excepted, the seventeenth-century farmer dealt with his neighbors, or with farmers of adjoining towns on those few occasions on which the land he sought was just over the town line.¹³

Seventeenth-century Dedham was a small place, including on the average about 500 souls. It was a little larger than the usual English village and a little smaller than most French villages, but was of a size common to many rural communities in the Atlantic civilization of the time. Yet the town grew steadily throughout the century. The population in 1648 was approximately 400; by 1700, it had risen to nearly 750. Natural increase accounted for the growth, since net immigration was

13. Family data from tax and birth records in *Records*, I, III, IV, V; the law most frequently ignored in the first decades was that requiring registration of land transactions, as a comparison of the town land records in the Dedham Town Hall with the Suffolk County Deeds will show; local expenses included the school costs and the minister's salary, as well as the usual expenses of representation, the meetinghouse, roads, and so forth; see *Records*, III, IV, V; the Index to the Calendar Index of the Suffolk County Court *Files* and the records in the offices of the Clerks of the County and Superior Courts of Suffolk cover in depth certain sample periods on which conclusions have been based; land transactions are found in the sources listed above.

negligible. The significance of the healthy rate of natural increase can only be appreciated in the light of the stagnation which characterized the level of population in the villages of seventeenth-century England and France.¹⁴ If Dedham was growing steadily while its counterparts in Europe were growing little if at all, then the fundamental conditions of life in Dedham must have been better than in Europe.¹⁵

Better in what way? The obvious explanation that springs to mind is that the birth rate must have been higher in Dedham than in seventeenth-century European villages. Surely these young settlers in a new land were prolific in a way impossible in the crowded, marginal villages of the Old World? But it was not so, for the birth rate was about forty births per 1000 population per year—a rate significantly but not remarkably higher than the birth rates of the villages of Clayworth and Cogenhoe in England and Crulai in France. Other figures support this judgment. The average intervals between births, the average number of births per marriage and the average number of marriages per 1000 population were substantially the same in Dedham as in these Old World villages. The devastating statistic which confirms this conclusion is the average age at marriage, which in Europe ranged around twenty-five years for women and twenty-seven years for men and in Dedham was twenty-three for women and twenty-five for men.¹⁶ The differ-

14. Again, see Lockridge, "The Population of Dedham." European figures are drawn from J. D. Chambers, *The Vale of Trent, 1670-1800* (London, 1957), E. Hobsbawm, "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present*, nos. 5 and 6 (1954), Laslett and Harrison, "Clayworth and Cogenhoe," and Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et les Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (2 vols., Paris, 1958).

15. Dedham's rate and pace of growth closely parallel those of Massachusetts as a whole, thus making it likely that the town's demographic structure was typical of this part of the New World and that the advantages it enjoyed were typically "American" advantages. See Lockridge, "The Population of Dedham."

16. European sources as above, plus A. Drake, "An Elementary Exercise in Parish Register Demography," *Economic History Review*,

ence in female marriage ages argues for a slightly higher birth rate in Dedham—since the younger women marry, the longer they are "eligible" to have children and the shorter the part of their fertile span that is wasted—but similarity is the main point. And, whether twenty-five or twenty-seven, the middle twenties are a late time for a man to begin married life. In a patronizing assumption of New World superiority, American demographers have commented sadly on the unfortunate conditions that kept European men from acquiring the wherewithal to support a family until they were nearly thirty. Their assumption was wrong, because in Dedham just as in Crulai or Clayworth a man did not find opportunity so plentiful that he could marry as young as he chose.

A great part of Dedham's steady growth and corresponding natural advantages over European villages must be explained through a lower death rate. At most, there were twenty-seven deaths per 1000 per year as against rates of thirty to forty and higher in Europe. Much of the difference can probably be ascribed to such long-range causes as better diet or better housing, conditions which acted year in and year out to prolong the lives of older persons and to ensure that more infants survived the critical days following birth. A more readily identifiable difference lay in the relative absence of short-range demographic "crises" in Dedham. In Europe, particularly in France, famines and plagues struck repeatedly. Often coming in clusters within a ten or twenty-year period, these disasters could wipe out a tenth, a quarter, a half or more of the population of a village. Crises were so severe in some French villages that they created "echoes," periods of low births a generation apart reflecting the initial crisis period of deaths and delayed marriages: fewer children were born or survived birth during a crisis; on reaching maturity their generation had fewer persons

XIV (1962), 427, and Louis Henry and Etienne Gautier, *La Population de Crulai, Paroisse Normande* (Paris, 1958).

available for marriage; a generation with fewer marriages had fewer children; and so it went until circumstances smoothed out the echoing flaw over a period of three or four generations. Dedham went through well over a half century without experiencing a single crisis which removed as much as ten percent of its population within a two-year span. For some reason this New World village was spared at least the worst ravages of disease, famine, and climate, effects all too familiar to rural Europeans of the time.¹⁷ It would be foolish to launch out in Jeffersonian praises of the benefits of benevolent nature in a new land free from the depravities of Europe, yet it is clear that the new land had some material gifts to offer and freedoms to bestow other than the freedom from Anglican persecution.

The town's insulation from the forces of nature had other results. Dedham paralleled Crulai in its seasons of birth, conceptions reaching a peak in the spring and descending to a low in the autumn. But in the New World town the difference between the month of highest conceptions and the month of lowest conceptions was lower than in Crulai. Children were being conceived throughout the year with distinctly less regard for the natural forces—climate, food, labor, whatever—which tended to impose a cyclic yearly pattern of conception on all the rural societies of the world.¹⁸

Yet in other ways nature did impose itself on human life in Dedham in just the same way and often as severely as in Europe. The similarities in birth rates and marriage ages bear witness to this truth, as does the parallel timing of the yearly cycle of conception. Then too, this town had its severe years; 1675-76 saw twenty-five deaths occur in Dedham. Several of the twenty-five were killed fighting in the same Indian war (King Philip's War) that had resulted in Robert Hinsdell's death, but most died of age and disease in the long season of alarms and

17. Lockridge, "Population of Dedham," and Goubert, *Beauvais*.
18. Lockridge, "Population of Dedham," and Henry and Gautier, *Crulai*.

excursions that accompanied the war. And year in and year out the seasons of death in Dedham were the same as in the European villages. In all, deaths occurred most frequently in the winter months, when cold, poor diet, and confinement combined to weaken the strong and kill the weak. No insulation from nature blessed Dedham with a reduction in the toll of deaths that mounted to a peak every December, January, February.¹⁹

The economy was agricultural. Men called themselves "yeoman" or "husbandman" as any farmer called himself in England. There was always a miller or two, a blacksmith, a cordwainer or other artisan in the town to supply the specialized needs of the economy, but easily eighty-five percent of the male inhabitants characterized themselves as farmers and most of the rest derived the greater part of their support from the land.²⁰ It was an unspecialized agriculture which they practiced, devoted largely to mere subsistence, and was very like the agriculture practiced in many sections of rural England. The same oaken tubs full of the same crops (peas, barley, wheat, rye, oats, hay, fruit)²¹ from fields of similar sizes rested in identical rooms in matching houses of farmers who achieved equal if modest prosperity and participated in like rural offices (poundkeeper, fence-viewer, hogreeve) in Dedham as in England.²²

What exactly might a farmer possess? His land aside, he would own essentially the possessions of an English yeoman farmer: within his house of two to eight rooms were a few beds, chests and chairs, a little pewter or silver, perhaps two changes

19. See Footnote 18.

20. Based on wills and inventories in the Suffolk County Probate Office and on occupational labels in documents in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds.

21. Indian corn excepted.

22. See Mildred Campbell, *The English Yeoman under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* (New Haven, Conn., 1942); W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant, The Economic and Social Structure of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957); and A. N. Garvan, *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, Conn., 1951).

of clothing and a good suit and cloak, a Bible, sometimes with commentaries thereon; outside was a barn or lean-to containing agricultural tools, a cart, bins, bowls, pots and pans, a few bushels of each of the staple crops, and finally a horse or two, several cattle and five or six each of sheep and swine. His whole estate would come to between 200 and 400 pounds Massachusetts currency.

No crop became a cash crop grown in quantity at the expense of others. The agricultural surpluses listed in the inventories varied with the season but were always small and distributed among three or four crops. This held for livestock as well. John Allin died in possession of twenty-eight sheep in 1671, John Bacon of twenty-four cattle in 1683, but these relatively modest herds were the height of acquisition in an economy in which specialized entrepreneurial farming was unknown. The farmers doubtless traded small quantities of grain, wood, beef and hides in nearby Boston in order to obtain the few manufactured necessities that were beyond their means to produce. Still, the message of the inventories of their estates is unmistakable: no single crop or animal dominated the village economy, and the farmers died without leaving the multiplicity of debts or credits with Boston merchants which would have resulted from a more developed commercial relationship.²³

Yet this simple subsistence economy was also an economy of abundance, for there was an incomparable abundance of land. To be sure, soil was often poor; even free public land grants had to be surveyed at some expense; a man's grant might be distant from his home; and if land was cheap to buy that was in part because it was wilderness land that would take years of backbreaking labor to clear. Yet there was land.

23. As might be supposed, wealth came from within the town. No Dedham men drew a majority of their wealth from outside sources. Within Dedham, prices remained fairly stable throughout the second half of the seventeenth century. Again, the relevant documents are in the Suffolk County Probate Office in Boston.

Privately owned land cost shillings an acre instead of pounds an acre as in England, and most townships were giving it away free. In Dedham, the conservatism of the town's early land policy did not last forever. No more than 3000 acres had been allotted in the first twenty years, but in the next twelve years over 15,000 acres were divided among the proprietors. A man who lived in the town for any twenty-five year span between 1636 and 1686 received between fifty and 500 acres from the town, 150 acres on the average.²⁴ This was by no means a farmstead beyond the wildest dreams of a successful English yeoman, but it meant security for the whole society of the village since it made every man a potential yeoman, a status enjoyed by only a fortunate minority of the English rural populace. It was a promise to every man's posterity, guaranteeing that the next generation would inherit the raw material of self-support. Even a younger son of a less than distinguished settler could expect a patrimony which would keep him from having to rent land or work for another man or beg in the streets.

The leaders of the colony reflected a general awareness of the unique abundance of the New World in the novel inheritance law they created. In England, the lands of a man who left no will would go to his eldest son under the law of primogeniture, whose aim was to prevent the fragmentation of holdings which would follow from a division among all the sons. This law arose from a mentality of scarcity. It left the landless younger sons to fend for themselves. In New England the law provided for the division of the whole estate among all the children of the deceased. Why turn younger sons out on the society without land or perhaps daughters without a decent

24. Land grants are in *Records*, III, IV, V and in manuscripts in the Dedham Town Hall. For English comparisons see Campbell, *English Yeoman*, Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant*, H. J. Habakkuk, "English Landownership, 1680-1740," *Economic History Review*, X(1940), 14, and Martha Jane Ellis "Halifax Parish, 1558-1640" (Ph.D. dissertation, Radcliffe-Harvard, 1958).